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DETROIT'S RIVERFRONT: Hurdles await, but park project flows with hope of revitalization

December 13, 2002

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Even as construction got under way Thursday on the just-announced Tri-Centennial State Park and Harbor by the Detroit River, numerous steps remained to make the vision of a revitalized riverfront a reality.

Among them: Billions more dollars need to be found to supplement the \$500 million already committed to the project. Deals must still be signed with the three cement companies that operate on the riverfront to make way for the new park. Numerous contracts, agreements and government approvals must be obtained.

Yet the mood was celebratory Thursday morning as Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick and leaders of his East Riverfront Study Group unveiled the most visionary plan in decades for Detroit's riverfront. Among the highlights: creation of three linked parks, construction of a 3-mile RiverWalk from Joe Louis Arena to the Belle Isle Bridge and establishment of a Detroit Riverfront Conservancy to build, maintain and operate the parks and RiverWalk.

Speaking in the sun-washed General Motors Wintergarden in the Renaissance Center, Kilpatrick referred to the riverfront as the "edge" of the city, and jokingly advised listeners

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again and again to "live on the edge" and "shop on the edge."

"This is another great day in the history of our city," he said.

The first work to be completed on the multiyear project is likely to be the remaking of streets, sewers, and other infrastructure in the east riverfront district. General Motors is also starting work on two 1,000-car parking structures east of the RenCen, which will include a health club and retail shops on the ground level.

This infrastructure work, necessary for all that will follow, is scheduled to be done by summer. The 3-mile RiverWalk is to be finished by 2006, although segments of it are to be finished sooner. Earth-moving started Thursday on the first 16 acres of what is envisioned as the 40-acre Tri-Centennial Park, the first of nearly 100 Michigan parks to be built in an urban area.

Somewhat later, the city will undertake greening of Hart Plaza, now mostly a vast expanse of concrete. As part of this, Ford Auditorium will probably be demolished to open a view toward the riverfront.

Meanwhile, the former Uniroyal factory just west of the Belle Isle Bridge is where the third park in the series is to be located. But details about funding and the environmental cleanup of the site remain to be resolved.

Kilpatrick admitted that more than \$2 billion will be needed to make the full vision come true, and three-quarters of that hasn't been found yet.

Among the important parts of the vision that still need an identified source of cash:

- Turning the so-called Dequindre Cut, a railroad line running through the riverfront district, into a bicycle or walking trail that would connect to the RiverWalk.
- Funding for later stages of the Tri-Centennial Park construction.

- Funding for the myriad of residences, shops, offices and restaurants that planners envision springing up near the riverfront parks in years to come.

Matt Cullen, GM's general manager of economic development and enterprises services, admitted that much remains to be done. But Cullen, who cochaired the mayor's riverfront study group with Kilpatrick's chief administrative assistant Derrick Miller, said all major players are already on board.

Those players include the State of Michigan, which kicked in \$150 million for road work and Tri-Centennial Park work; the City of Detroit, putting in \$180 million obtained from the city's three casinos, to pay for parking and demolition of the cement silos, and the Kresge Foundation, which donated \$50 million in challenge grants for the RiverWalk.

"There are certainly steps to take, important stakeholder groups to continue to encourage, and various governmental approvals and so on to be made," Cullen said. "Until those things are done, there's always some risk."

But he added, "Our general sense of it is, I think we succeeded in creating a vision and a first wave of such scale and significance that people just wouldn't be prepared to step in front of it or allow someone to step in front of it."

Clearly, a number of practical and conceptual obstacles need to be overcome.

For one thing, creation of the centerpiece Tri-Centennial State Park and Harbor will require the cement companies on the river to move out. The city is still trying to negotiate those deals.

George Jackson, president and chief executive of the Detroit Economic Growth Corp., is handling the negotiations. As with other city land deals, arriving at a fair price has been a sticking point.

"The City of Detroit doesn't operate with a bottomless checkbook," he said at the unveiling ceremony Thursday. "It has to get back to realism. I can't blame them for trying to get the

best deal possible, but at the same time it has to be realistic based on the finances of the city and our ability to pay."

On a more conceptual level, the unveiling hinted at what might rise by way of residences, shops and other development in the area adjacent to the new parks. But none of it has been planned or funded in detail yet.

Steve Flum, chair of the urban priorities committee of the American Institute of Architects' Detroit chapter, said success of the overall project depends on how well or poorly all that development takes place.

"This is the first step," he said of the plan unveiled Thursday. "It's a heck of a first step, but the next steps are how do we complement this open space. All urban spaces don't happen in a big master plan. They happen block by block, developer by developer."

Carol Weisfeld, secretary of the Riverfront East Alliance, called for preservation of many historic but dilapidated structures in the area -- such as the historic Globe factory building, which dates to the late 19th Century, and which Cullen said the city hopes to save at least in part.

"The great challenge before us is not to demolish but to design; not to replace, but to restore," Weisfeld said.

Meanwhile, the state's mounting budget deficit poses a problem for future funding. And the often-thorny relationship between the city and property owners in the riverfront district could raise concerns. Some of those owners already fault the city for not keeping them better informed.

Mirvan Hayes, who operates his Hayes Grinding knife sharpening business in the east riverfront district, said owners are often kept in the dark about city plans.

"We want to work with the city. We'll back them 100 percent. But the thing is, when things happen, is it wrong to be informed?"

A few naysayers Thursday questioned the underlying premise that great riverfront parks will help to revitalize the city.

"Improving life in Detroit will require a focus on fundamentals -- lower taxes and less regulation, as well as good basic services such as police and fire, not high-profile subsidized construction projects," said Michael LaFaive, a staff economist with the Midland-based Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a conservative policy think-tank.

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